THE PRETENSIONS OF MORAL REALISM

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Abstract. Many philosophers argue that the face-value of moral practice provides presumptive support to moral realism. This paper analyses such arguments into three steps. (1) Moral practice has a certain face-value, (2) only realism can vindicate this face value, and (3) the face-value needs vindicating. Two potential problems with such arguments are discussed. The first is taking the relevant face-value to involve explicitly realist commitments; the second is underestimating the power of non-realist strategies to vindicate that face-value. Case studies of each of these errors are presented, drawn from the writings of Shafer-Landau, Brink and McNaughton, and from recent work experimental metaethics. The paper then considers weak presumptive arguments, according to which both realist and non-realist vindications of moral practice are possible, but the realist vindications are more natural. It is argued that there is no sense of 'natural' available that can make these arguments work. The conclusion is that all extant presumptive arguments for moral realism fail. In closing remarks, the paper presents some further reason to be pessimistic about all possible presumptive arguments in metaethics and considers the effect on the shape of the meta-ethical dialectic were this conclusion to be accepted.

This paper adopts the conservative aim of exposing a mistake that is increasingly prevalent in the metaethical literature. The mistake is supposing the 'face-value', 'appearance' or 'pretensions' of moral practice to generate a dialectical presumption in favor of moral realism. I will argue that, as usually understood, the face-value fails to provide even defeasible evidence in favor of any metaethical theory, realist or otherwise.[1] Recognizing this point leads to a radical rethink of the focus of metaethical debate and entails that many existing defences of realism (and its rivals) are inadequate.

1. Realism and Presumptive Arguments

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[1] In a recent paper, Finlay writes: "Recently, however, some expressivists appear to be shifting to a more aggressive and less apologetic posture, maintaining that the appearances don't favour realist over antirealist views at all" (Finlay 2010 p.341). My arguments are in this tradition.

Moral realism is the view that moral judgments express mental states that represent the world as realizing distinctively moral states of affairs ('cognitivism') and that there exists a moral reality that these states sometimes correctly represent. For realists, the constituents of the world include distinctively moral states of affairs (or facts or properties or events, depending on one's preferred ontology): in Mackie's famous phrase (1977 p.15), values are part of the fabric of the world. Realists differ amongst themselves regarding the precise nature of this moral reality, for example concerning its independence from the attitudes of actual or hypothetical agents, its reducibility to other aspects of reality and its relation to the natural world. Some characterizations of realism also include the claim that moral judgments are truth-apt and that some of them are true. These characterizations of realism are secondary to the one employed here, given that truth-aptness and truth can be understood via the notions of belief and accurate representation. As understood here, therefore, realism is not the view that moral judgments are truth-apt and sometimes true, but a particular theory of the semantic functioning of moral judgments that allows us to explain in what sense they are truth-apt and sometimes true.

Opposed to realism are two kinds of antirealism. The first – error-theory – accepts cognitivism but denies the realists' metaphysical claim. Consequently all positive moral judgments are false, though they may be practically valuable in ways unconnected to their truth. The second – expressivism – denies that moral judgments express moral beliefs ('non-cognitivism'). Instead the primary role of moral judgments is to express affective attitudes whose contents and expression play a distinctive role in the interpersonal co-ordination of attitude and action. According to expressivists, the distinctive import of moral judgments arises from such a co-coordinating role, not from expressing states that offer representations of the way the world might (morally) be. So understood, expressivism is *prima facie* consistent with moral judgments being truth-apt and sometimes true. At least, this possibility cannot be ruled out independently of a consideration of the debate concerning the nature of truth-aptness and truth. In what follows, therefore, the debate between realists and expressivists is assumed to to concern not the truth-aptness or truth of moral judgments, but the distinctive semantic and psychological function of those judgments.

According to presumptive arguments for moral realism our moral practice possesses certain features which provide defeasible evidence for realism, since only realism can vindicate those features. Here 'moral practice' refers to the use of a distinctive moral terminology – such as 'morally good', 'morally right', 'just' and 'cruel' – in public discourse, personal deliberation and any subsequent determination of or influence on action. Precisely what makes moral terminology (or the moral use of terminology) distinctive is beyond the scope of the present paper: for now it is sufficient that both realists and their opponents accept the existence of a distinctive moral practice defined by a distinctive moral vocabulary (or vacabulary in a distinntive moral use).

Presumptive arguments can be further analysed into three distinct stages.

(a) The first is a claim about the face-value of moral practice. The proponent of the argument claims that moral practice possesses certain experiential, linguistic or discursive forms and that those who engage in that practice make certain assumptions when doing so. (I shall refer to these forms and assumptions collectively as 'features' of the practice.) Typical experiential forms include: the immediacy of moral experience and the apparent worldliness of such experience (that value-as-experienced is 'out there' in the world, not a feature of ourselves). Typical linguistic and discursive forms include: the subject-predicate form of some moral sentences; their embedding in logical contexts such as negation; their embedding in other contexts such as those of explanation, propositional attitude attribution and truth attribution; their featuring in standard infererence patters, such as modus ponens. Typical assumptions include: that some actions are right, others wrong; that the rightness or wrongness of actions is not dependent on the responses of those judging them right or wrong; that the truth or falsity moral judgments is not dependent on the responses of those making the judgments; that there are correct answers to moral questions; that any given moral judgment may turn out to be false; that moral disagreement is possible; that moral discussion is sometimes a fruitful way of resolving moral disagreement; that moral claims can be supported by reasons. Some presumptive arguments focus exclusively on the experiential forms of moral practice and thus as a whole such arguments are sometimes labeled 'arguments from phenomenology' (see Kirchin 2003 and Loeb 2007). Yet many of the features of moral practice are not easily described as phenomenological, so this label is only appropriate if 'phenomenology' is broadly construed. Note also that each feature

generates a distinct presumptive argument. Most realists employ a cluster of structurally identical presumptive arguments.

(b) The second stage is to claim that only moral realism can take moral practice at face-value. That is, only realism can vindicate the forms and assumptions in question. To vindicate a form or assumption is to justify the continued engagement in a practice that exhibits that form or which makes that assumption. Any theory that fails to vindicate a form or assumption is 'revisionary' and to that extent implausible.

The precise content of the claim made at this second stage is often unclear. Sometimes it is that only realism can vindicate the features in question, so antirealism is necessarily revisionary. Sometimes it is the weaker claim that only realism can *naturally* vindicate these features, so antirealism offers an unnatural or substandard vindication. Sometimes it is the still weaker claim that only realism has *so far* vindicated the relevant features, so we cannot say for certain that antirealism is revisionary or unnatural, but we know that it is incomplete. This paper will not discuss arguments that employ this weakest claim, since they are necessarily hostage to further developments in our understanding of antirealism. Arguments that employ the first claim may be called 'strong presumptive arguments', those that employ the second 'weak presumptive arguments'.

(c) The third stage of any presumptive argument is typically implicit but is necessary to secure validity. It is the claim that the face-value of moral practice requires saving. More precisely, it is the claim that the actual features of moral discourse are in need of vindication.[2] Without this assumption, the fact (if it is a fact) that only realism can (naturally) vindicate these features would not support realism, since it would not be a desideratum on any metaethical theory to do so. With this desideratum in place the fact (if it is a fact) that only realism can vindicate these features provides defeasible evidence in favor of realism.

We have then, instructions for the presumptive argument three-step: (1) Moral practice has a certain face-value (2) Only realism can save that face-value (3) The

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[2] See Timmons 1999 p.12 and McNaughton 1988 pp.16, 64. Note that McNaughton and Timmons express this desideratum as the claim that the features of moral practice must be 'accommodated' or 'made sense of' by metaethical theory. Like Loeb (2007 p.475) I resist these terms because they can easily be taken to include not only cases where features are vindicated, but cases where they are given a debunking explanation. I argue below (§3) that it is vindication and not accommodation in this broader sense that is desirable in metaethics, at least when it comes to those features of moral practice listed in §1(a).

face-value needs saving.[3] It is important to note that, even if a presumptive argument is successful, it provides only a defeasible case for realism. Presumptive arguments show that with respect to one desideratum on metaethical theories – the desideratum of vindicating the face-value of moral practice – realism has an advantage over its rivals. This is some evidence in favor of realism, but is not conclusive, since there may be other desiderata on metaethical theorizing with respect to which realism looses its comparative advantage. However, were it to prove that realism was at least as good as its rivals in meeting these further desiderata, the comparative advantage it carries from saving the face-value of moral practice would turn the presumptive case into a decisive one.

2. Actual Presumptive Arguments

Most realists employ presumptive arguments, although the features of moral practice that provide the focus for each argument varies considerably. Wiggins (1979) alights on the assumption that the correctness of moral choices is determined independently of facts about us and claims that antirealist theories must distort this appearance. Dancy (1986 p.172) presents an argument fixed on the form of moral experience, in particular the experience of moral properties as being 'in the world'. McNaughton (1988 p.37) also employs claims about moral phenomenology but adds to these claims about the assumptions of those who make moral judgments, for example the assumption that 'moral properties are part of the fabric of the world' and that the veracity of moral judgments is independent of facts about the judge or her community. Nolan et al. (2005 p.307) claim that moral discourse 'presupposes there are objective moral truths'. Brink (1989 p.25) adds further ingredients, claiming that moral practice has certain realist-friendly forms, for example, 'fact-stating and property ascribing form'. Shafer-Landau (2003 p.23) emphasizes the linguistic forms employed in moral discourse, for example the form generated by use of the locution 'it is true that…', while Majors (2003 p.135) highlights the appearance of moral predicates in explaining phrases. Most recently, Finlay (2007 p. 823) discusses what he calls the 'objective pretensions' of morality, which include the linguistic forms

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[3] It is here worth noting another type of argument for realism that shares the first step of presumptive arguments. According to this argument, the face-value of moral practice is not uniquely vindicated by realism, rather it entails the truth of realism. See Harcourt 2005 for the argument and Ridge 2006b.

generated by the use of the truth-predicate, the contexts of negation, belief and knowledge. Many of these authors also talk more broadly of the 'face-value', 'pretension' or 'appearance' of moral practice, claiming that only realism remains true to how things 'seem' (Nolan et al. 2005 p.307) or takes moral claims 'literally' (Brink 1989 p.23).

It is noteworthy here that those who present presumptive arguments often waiver between the strong and weak forms. This is the difference between arguments which hold that only realism can vindicate the face-value and those which hold, more weakly, that only realism can naturally vindicate the face value (the implication is that antirealist theories can provide the requisite vindication, but that it is an unnatural or substandard one). For example, Shafer-Landau implies a weak presumptive argument when he claims that 'non-cognitivism lacks a *natural* account of moral truth' (2003 p.37, my emphasis). Elsewhere, however, the logic is that of a strong presumptive argument, for example in the claim that antirealists '*must* question the phenomenology itself, owing to their *inability* to preserve the appearances in ethics' (2003 p.104, my emphasis). Brink more consistently offers a strong presumptive argument, claiming the antirealism must revise our moral practice in some way: 'If we reject moral realism, it seems we must regard the form and content of our moral judgments as misleading and inappropriate' (1989 p.26; see also pp.29, 36 and 87). But there are also intimations of the weaker argument, in passages such as: '…realism alone…provides a *natural* explanation or justification of the way we do and can conduct ourselves in moral thought and inquiry' (1989 p.24, author's own emphasis). My discussion of presumptive arguments will keep weak and strong versions distinct, since although I think they both fail, they do so for importantly different reasons. (One must also be alert to those who try to gain argumentative capital from conflating the two types of argument.)

Despite the confusion between strong and weak forms of the argument, realists are generally aware that presumptive arguments by themselves generate only defeasible case for realism. McNaughton (1988 p.40) puts the point succinctly:

> [This] appeal to the nature of moral experience...represents a starting point for an argument, not a conclusion…only a presumption would have been established and presumptions can be defeated.

Some antirealists accept this presumptive burden and proceed to argue that there are distinct considerations against moral realism that outweigh it (see, for example, Mackie 1997 pp.36-42). But there is scope for a stronger position according to which the presumption in favor of realism is not outweighed but undermined: that is, the purported features of moral practice that moral realists take to ground a defeasible reason in favor of their theory turn out, on inspection, not to ground any such reason at all. This is the position defended in this paper.

One qualification is necessary before proceeding. The primary aim of this paper is to defend the claim that the features of moral practice listed in §1(a) fail to provide a presumptive case for realism. I do not claim that all possible presumptive arguments fail, since there may be other features of moral practice, not listed here, that do create a genuine presumption. Nevertheless the criticisms presented here are important insofar as the serve to undermine most of the extant presumptive arguments that have been offered, which, as we have just seen, focus on one or other of the features listed in §1(a).[4]

3. Is Vindication Desirable?

If a particular form or assumption fails to generate a presumption in favor of realism, it is because one or more of the three stages of the presumptive argument fails. In a recent paper, Loeb has questioned the third stage, at least as it applies to commonly discussed assumptions such as the assumption that any of our moral judgements may prove incorrect (the assumption of fallibility). Loeb argues that it begs the question against error-theorists to suppose that such assumptions require vindication. If metaethical enquiry is to leave open the possibility that existing moral practice is in irretrievable error in assuming fallibility (for example), then it cannot be a requirement on that enquiry that we retain this assumption (see Loeb 2007 pp.475-7). In this section I argue that, contra Loeb, at least some of the features of moral practice mentioned in §1(a) require vindication. This is to argue in favor of the third stage of presumptive arguments as it applies to these features.

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[4] One further clarification may be necessary. My targets in this paper are realists – such as Brink and Shafer-Landau – who accept a distinction between first-order moral commitments and the second-order meta-theory of those commitments, and who hold that the structure or content of the former supports a realist view of the latter. For the sake of argument this paper also accepts this distinction. For defences of 'moral objectivity' that question this distinction see Dworkin 1996 and Nagel 1997. For critical discussion see Blackburn 1998 pp.294-9.

Why suppose that any of the features of actual moral practice require vindication? After all, this is not an assumption that we make about all discursive practices, discourse about witches being an obvious example. The distinctness of the moral case must lie in the thought that moral practice is, at least in the most part, a practice that we have good reason to go on engaging in. This pragmatic assumption is supported by the observation that practically all known human societies have developed something akin to moral practice (see, for example, Brown 1991 and Joyce 2007 pp.6406). In addition, careful observation from our own case shows that moral practice as a whole allows us to relate to the world, and to others, in worthwhile ways that would simply not be possible without it. To consider whether an action is wrong, a policy admirable, a state of affairs worthwhile or a character depraved, is to engage in a type of practical reflection and discussion that would not be possible without moral terminology. Of course, the precise nature of this practical import of morality has been much debated. It has been suggested, for example, that it consists in the fact that morality is capable of questioning the ultimate ends of action and/or in the fact that morality makes demands which are not contingent upon the vicarious desires of actual agents. But whatever its precise nature, it is plausible to think that there is some such import that is distinctive of moral practice.[5] Nothing of comparable importance is lost through dispensing with discourse about witches.

It is important, however, not to overstate the scope of the pragmatic assumption. The above considerations do not justify the claim that *all* features of moralizing as it is practiced 21st century American society, say, require vindication. Indeed there are reasons to think that this is not the case: first because it is unlikely that our actual behavior manifests a single teleologically unified practice, second because false and inconsistent metatheories may have infested the practice, so that some reflective moralizers engage in the practice with a (false) understanding of their activities built in. For these reasons, it is likely that any metaethical theory will be revisionary of some of the features of actual moral practice, making the requirement to vindicate all of these features implausibly strong.

A more reasonable desideratum holds that a metaethical theory should be able to vindicate all of the *pragmatically important* features of moral discourse. On this

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[5] For some realist accounts of this practical import, see Railton 1986 and Wedgwood 2001. For antirealist accounts see Blackburn 1998 and Gibbard 1990.

view, any actual form or assumption of moral practice that a metatheory asks us to revise carries an explanatory cost, but this cost can be met so long as the metatheory can show how the important things that we want to say and do using moral practice, and all of those substantial debates moral practice involves, are preserved in the recommended revised practice (see Stevenson 1937 p.15). For example, it will be no good recommending that we replace moralizing with a system of communal chanting, if by doing so we lose an important aspect of the way we interact with each other and the world. What the pragmatically important aspects of moral practice are will, of course, be a matter of metaethical dispute. Thus in order to be plausible a metaethical theory must first defend an account of the way moralizing helps us relate in worthwhile ways to the world and to each other and then show how, given this account, some (if not all) of the features of actual moral practice are to be expected.

It seems likely that most of the features mentioned in §1(a) are pragmatically important and thus in need of vindication. In general this is because only a practice which legitimately exhibited these features could allow us relate to the world and to each other in the useful ways that moral practice undoubtedly does. To take Loeb's example: if the assumption of fallibility were to be abandoned then all moral discussion and reflection would be futile, since no one would ever be persuaded that their moral opinion was incorrect. Yet the abandonment of all moral discussion and reflection would leave us with an impoverished set of tools with which to relate to each other and the world. Similarly, if moral sentences could not be embedded in logical contexts such as negation then all moral argument involving such contexts would be impossible. A group of individuals who could not employ the devices of logical argument to moral matters in this way would be without an important way of relating to each other and the world. Therefore a metaethical theory is defective to the extent that it fails to vindicate these features of moral practice. Similar arguments apply with respect to the other features mentioned in §1(a). In all cases, human interaction would be impoverished should the feature of the practice disappear.

Note that the desideratum to vindicate pragmatically important features of moral practice is not, therefore, an unsupported or question-begging assumption in the debate: it is supported by reflection on the way in which moral discourse allows us to relate to others and the world in worthwhile ways (even though the precise form of these ways is difficult to specify). It is also not a blanket desideratum that unthinkingly covers all of the actual features of moral practice, for it allows the

possibility that some features of the discourse may not be pragmatically important and hence not in need of vindication. A considered metaethical theory, in other words, needs to respect the obvious pragmatic importance of moral practice without falling into undue reverence of the often highly sociologically contingent forms that practice may take. However this balance is struck, ignoring the pragmatic importance of morality, as Loeb strategy suggests, is unjustified.

4. Error-theoretic Vindication

Even if it is accepted that metaethical theories must vindicate the features listed in §1(a), presumptive arguments that refer to these features might fail in the first two stages. Before coming to my own criticisms of these stages, in this section I consider an attack on the second stage of presumptive arguments that can made by an error-theorist.

The second stage of presumptive arguments holds that only realism can vindicate the forms and assumptions of moral practice, where vindication involves justifying the continued engagement in a practice that possess these forms or that makes these assumptions. In the case where a metatheory justifies the continued engagement in a practice that makes a certain assumption, we can distinguish two types of vindication. In the first case, an assumption is vindicated because it turns out to be true, according to the metatheory. In the second case an assumption is vindicated because, although it is not true according to the metatheory, it is an assumption that is useful to make in the situations with which the practice is primarily concerned. As an example of this second, error-theoretic form of justification, Joyce (2001 pp.206-31) has argued that in practical contexts rational agents are justified in assuming that some actions are right, others wrong, despite that fact that in their most undistracted, reflective and critical moments they must admit that no actions are ever right or wrong. Such views are distinct from Loeb's, since they accept that the assumption in question requires vindication. What they deny is that only realism can vindicate the assumption. They thus resist the second stage of presumptive arguments.

Nevertheless there is an obvious sense in which such vindications are second-rate in comparison with the realist alternative. For the assumptions of moral practice often appear *full-blooded* in the sense that those who make the assumption consider their so doing to be incompatible with admitting a possible context of reflection in

which the assumption does not hold. For example, when ordinary moral agents assume that some actions are right and others wrong they do so in a way that is threatened by the claim that, in some reflective moral context, this isn't the case. Ordinary moralizers assume that some actions are right, with no qualification (this doesn't entail that all ordinarly moralizers assume that the same action is right, with no qualification). Likewise when ordinary moralisers assume that their moral opinion may turn out to be false, they do so in a way that would be threatened by the claim that, at some level of reflection, no moral opinion is ever in error. Furthermore, that the assumptions of moral practice are full-blooded in this sense appears necessary to the practical import of moral practice. An agent who accepted that, all told, actions were never right or wrong, would be relectant to engage in personal sacrifice for the sake of morally right action (see Lillehammer 2004 p.101). Likewise, an agent who accepted that, at base, moral judgements could never be in error, would be disinclined to engage in moral argument with others where that argument has no obvious personal benefit. In general, moral agents would not see their behaviours influenced by morality in the pragmatically important ways they are if their adherence to the assumptions of moral practice were not full-blooded. In so far as any error-theoretic vindication of assumtions cannot preserve full-bloodedness, it is to that extent revisionary. What is needed to resist the second stage of the presumptive is a full-blooded antirealist vindication of the relevant assumptions.

5. Two Further Errors

So far we have not seen any reason to doubt the force of presumptive arguments that employ at least some of features listed in §1(a). Against Loeb, the ubiquity and practical import of moral practice shows that these features require vindication. Against error-theorists such as Joyce, the full-bloodedness of some of these features rules out error-theoretic vindications of them. Yet it still doesn't follow that the presumptive arguments that make reference to these features are successful, because there are two further mistakes that such arguments may make.

The first is thinking that the face value of moral practice is metaethically loaded, and in the realists favor. This begins as an error in the first stage of presumptive arguments, for it mistakes the content of the face-value of moral practice. More precisely the mistake is to suppose that realism itself, or some of its distinctive

claims, are among the features of moral practice that require vindication. I shall argue that actual moral practice doesn't involve any explicit metaethical commitments – realist or otherwise – and that even if it did it wouldn't follow that these commitments were in need of vindication.

Avoiding the first error, realists might claim that though the (pragmatically important) features of moral practice are in themselves metaethically neutral, they could only be vindicated were realism to be true. This line of argument presupposes a claim about the power of antirealists to vindicate the pragmatically important features of moral practice and as such is vulnerable to a second error: underestimating the vindicating resources available to antirealists. This is an error in the second stage of presumptive arguments. I shall argue that once the first error is avoided the features that remain in need of vindication are features for which antirealists can provide plausible vindications or, at least, that this is so for all of the features listed in §1(a).

In the next two sections I elaborate on these criticisms, giving examples of each mistake from the recent literature.

6. First Error: Realism Part of the Face-value

If those who engage in moral practice experience morality as sensitivity to moral properties such as the realist posits, then realism is an experiential form of moral practice. Similarly, if those who engage in moral practice are disposed to assent to moral realism (or some of its distinctive claims) when questioned about their understanding of their practice, then realism is an explicit assumption of moral practice. Finally, if one of the linguistic forms of moral practice is that of being fact-stating (in the realist sense) then realism is a linguistic form of moral practice. If we suppose that such appearances, assumptions and forms require non-error-theoretic vindication then it follows that only realism can vindicate the pragmatically important features moral practice. The face-value of moral practice would be explicitly metaethically loaded in favor of realism.

But antirealists can and should resist these claims. First, because it is implausible to think that realism – or indeed any metaethical theory – is an explicit experiential content, assumption or form of ordinary moral practice. Second because even if this did turn out to be the case, it wouldn't follow that these features are pragmatically important (and thus in need of vindication). I take these points in turn.

The first point can be most easily made with respect to the experiential forms of moral practice. As Kirchin (2003 pp.249-51) argues, the claims of moral realism do not seem to be part of the content of moral experience. The starting point of our everyday moral experience is a moral response to situations the experience of which can be non-morally described: we respond with moral disapproval to an act of deliberate infliction of pain, with moral disquiet to an unequal distribution of resources or with moral approval to an agent who puts helping others before helping himself. In these confrontations with the world, moral properties themselves do not feature as elements in our experience. As Kirchin (2003 p.250) puts it: 'Do we really have a raw experience of ethical values as being mind-independent, as being a certain metaphysical [realist] way? Surely, instead, this idea enters our mind after we have reflected on our and other's ethical responses'.[6] Furthermore, although our moral responses are themselves experienced as constrained by the features of the world – so for example, we may feel that moral disapproval is mandated by the deliberate infliction of pain, that the world itself, and not ourselves, make this response appropriate – this is perfectly compatible with those responses being ultimately affective rather than cognitive. As Blackburn (1993 pp.154-5) has pointed out, it is common for those in the grip of a particular pattern of concern to experience various features of the world as constraining their responses. For example, a love-struck individual will see the pain of her bethrothed as mandating her assisstance. To hold further that the phenomenology of moral responses reflects not just this worldliness but also a particular – realist – explanation of it is to attribute an unrealistic degree of conceptual sophistication to immediate moral experience.[7]

This point concerning arguments from moral experience easily generalizes to those concerning the assumptions and linguistic forms of moral practice.

Regarding assumptions, it is unlikely that moral realism (or any of its distinctive claims) is an explicit assumption of everyday moralizers. Everyday moralizers seldom show appreciation of metaethical issues and categories, let alone

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[6] See also Hume's *Treatise* 3.1.1.25: 'Take any action allowed to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In which-ever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action.'

[7] See McDowell 1985 (footnote 4) for an example of this error.

appreciation of a particular metaethical theory. The categories that define metaethical theories are to a large extent philosopher's constructs rather than tacit categories of everyday moralizers. This is not to denigrate the complexities of first-order moral thought. Everyday moralizers hold that some things are right, others wrong, that some moral judgments are true, that there are correct answers to moral questions, that moral disagreement is possible, that moral claims can be supported by reasons and so on. But these are not categories that define realism. What defines realism is the view that moral judgments have a characteristic linguistic function, express states of mind with a characteristic representational function and (therefore) that their truth consists in correspondence between the representational content of such states and the moral way of the world. These are sophisticated philosophical claims, involving, for example, an appreciation of the distinctions between representational and non-representational linguistic and psychological functions and between truth understood as accurate representation and truth understood in other terms. It is one thing to claim that everyday moralizers assume moral judgments to be true, quite another to claim that they assume moral truth to be understood as the realist sees it. Ask the woman on the Clapham omnibus whether recreational torture is wrong and she may well reply that it is. But ask whether her judgment that torture is wrong is representative of moral reality, or made true by correspondence between the representational content of the mental state her judgment expresses and the distinctively moral state of the world and one is more likely to be faced with an uncomprehending silence. Of course, she may take it that to say that 'The judgment that recreational torture is wrong represents moral reality' is to say no more than the original 'Recreational torture is wrong'. But in that case this is not to offer any metaethical claim, rather just to repeat the original assertion in a different (perhaps more emphatic) idiom.

A recent trend in 'experimental' metaethics provides a possible objection to this line of thought. This research program involves experimental situations designed to elicit metaethical responses from moral agents untutored in metaethical literature. Goodwin and Darley (2008), for example, seek to determine to what extent everyday moralizers are committed to the possibility of a type of moral disagreement where the dissenting party is regarded as being mistaken. The experimental results thus secured are important to an informed understanding of our actual moral practices, but their metaethical import is limited. In particular, Goodwin and Darley assume that recognizing such disagreement is 'one of the hallmarks of ethical objectivism' (2008

p.1344), and thus take their experimental results to show that most everyday moralizers are ethical objectivists. But though there may be a stipulative, platitudinous, sense of 'objectivism' in which those who assume there to be moral disagreement of the relevant type are objectivists, this finding doesn't speak to the metaethical debate between realism and antirealism, since antirealists too can accommodate this type of disagreement. For anti-realists, moral disagreement is disagreement in attitude, and one will regard the other's attitude as mistaken just so long as it clashes with an attitude that one reflectively endorses and one has a motive to change the others' attitude (see, for example, Stevenson 1937, 1944 and 1948). In the more usual sense of 'objectivism', according to which it is a version of moral realism on which moral properties are constitutively independent of agents' responses, it is false that assuming the relevant sort of moral disagreement to be possible is tantamount to assuming objectivism, since, so defined, non-objectivist accounts of such disagreement are available.[8] In either case the experimental data obtained by Goodwin and Darley does not mark out the participants in their trial as tacit moral realists. The assumption of disagreement this experiment focuses on is, of course, a pragmatically important assumption of moral practice, but it is not a metaethical one.[9]

Note that my reasons for doubting moral realism to be an explicit assumption of moral practice employ empirical claims about actual moralizers, just as Kirchin's rebuttal of the phenomenological argument relies on empirical claims about (his own) moral experience. Yet insofar as realists rely on such claims in offering presumptive arguments, the burden here lies with the realist to support the empirical claims her argument requires. This is why the methodology of experimental metaethics to be welcomed. But even given this admirable attempt to ground the realist case, the presumptive argument fails because the empirical evidence does not support the claim that moral realism (as opposed to moral objectivism in the platitudinous sense) is an assumption of moral practice. Nor will it advance the realist case to point out that *some* people (philosophy professors, perhaps) make the assumption of realism when engaging in moral practice (see, for example, Cuneo 2006). For it is equally true that

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[8] For this sense of objectivism, see Sayre-McCord 1988 and Shafer-Landau 2003.

[9] A similar point applies to the interpretation of the experiments performed by Nichols and Folds-Bennett (2003). In this case, the authors equate acceptance of the response-independence of moral attributions with acceptance of moral objectivism. Since antirealists can vindicate the response-independence of moral attributions (see Blackburn 1984), this empirical discovery is theoretically important but metatheoretically neutral.

some people (other philosophy professors, perhaps) make antirealist assumptions when moralizing and it begs the question against antirealism to assume that the realist assumptions must be vindicated at the expense of the antirealist ones.

There is, however, a more serious problem with presumptive arguments at in this area. This is because even if it should turn out, after empirical investigation, that realism is an assumption made by some, most, or even all actual moralizers, it wouldn't follow that it was also a pragmatically important one. That is, even granting that realism is itself part of the face-value of moral practice, and that only realism can vindicate this face value, it doesn't follow that this particular part of the face value stand in need of vindication. So long as it was possible for agents to engage in a parallel practice, shorn of the assumption of realism, and in doing so still relate to each other and the world in the important ways made possible by moral practice, then the realist assumption would not be pragmatically important, despite its ubiquity. Furthermore, such a parallel practice does seem to be a genuine possibility.

To see this, consider the following scenario. On the planet Golgafrincham all of those who engage in moral practice assume the truth of moral realism. That is, they are disposed to assent to moral realism when questioned regarding their understanding of their moral practice (or perhaps, disposed to assent after teaching and reflection). On colonizing nearby Lamuella the Golgafrincham's encounter another species who also engage in moral practice and yet do not assume realism while doing so. The Lamuellans engage in a practice with all of the features mentioned in §1(a): they apply moral predicates, they assume that some things are right, others wrong, that some moral judgments are true, that there are correct answers to moral questions, that moral disagreement is possible, that moral claims can be supported by reasons and so on. What Lamuellans lack is any disposition to assent to moral realism (even after tutoring). After colonization the two races henceforth engage in moral disputes, relating to each other and the world in the ways only made accessible by morality: they dispute the rightness and wrongness of certain courses of actions, discourse about the good life, negotiate moral frameworks within which to frame the laws of their society and so on (all the while assuming that some things are right, others wrong, that some moral judgments are true, that there are correct answers to moral questions, that moral disagreement is possible and so on). The fact that the Lumellans, who make no assumption of realism, can thus engage in important moral dispute with

the Golgafrinchams proves that the assumption of moral realism is not a pragmatically important part of moral practice.[10] What is important for the pragmatic benefits of moral practice is to assume that some things are right, others wrong, that some moral judgments are true, that there are correct answers to moral questions, that moral disagreement is possible, that moral claims can be supported by reasons and so on. It is not important that one assume any particular – for example, realist – vindicatory story of these claims.[11]

Hence even if moral realism were itself a universally held assumption of actual moralizers, it wouldn't follow that it is pragmatically important, that is, in need of vindication. (To suppose otherwise is a mistake at the third stage of presumptive arguments.) This objection places an even more onerous burden of proof on the realist. It is not enough to show (what has yet to be shown) that ordinary moralizers assume the truth of moral realism. To establish a presumption, realists need to show that *only* a practice that makes such an assumption can help us relate to the world and to each other in the ways allowed for by moral practice. As the example above demonstrates, it is unlikely that this can be done.

At this stage the realist may prefer to claim that their theory (or some of its distinctive claims) is a pragmatically important linguistic form of moral practice, rather than a form of moral experience or an assumption of that practice. For example, realists often claim the moral practice has 'fact-stating form', the form of a practice that makes reference to moral properties, or simply 'realist form' (see, for example, Brink 1989 pp.25-7 and Shafer-Landau 2003 p.23). Unfortunately it is unclear what to make of such claims. To say that a practice has fact-stating form could mean no more than that it involves uttering indicative sentences, where a predicate is applied to a subject, and that there are some interpersonally agreed standards for applying such predicates. To say that a practice makes reference to properties could mean no more than to say that it involves such predication. These are indeed genuine forms of moral

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[10] Generalizing, the thought is that agents with differing meta-ethical views, even those with no meta-ethical views, can be involved in pragmatically important moral agreement and disagreement. Thus Lenman (2007 p.74): 'Think of the most clear-cut and obviously appalling instances of such crimes as murder, torture or rape. Now of course we all think it's just a no-brainer that behaviour like this is wrong…*What sort of thought is this?*...I don't think it's the thought that this behaviour has some sort of non-natural property because I don't think there are any natural properties…I don't think that you would need to agree with me about that rather rarefied metaphysical claim to agree with me that this sort of behaviour is morally wrong.'

[11] See Blackburn 1993 pp.150-1 for the same conclusion.

practice, but they are not realist forms, since standard-governed predication can be understood in non-realist ways (see Blackburn 1984, 1998, Gibbard 1990, 2003 and Lenman 2003). On the other hand, it is difficult to see what else realists might mean by saying that moral practice has fact-stating form, or what it might add to say that the practice itself has 'realist' form. They may mean that realism is an explicit assumption of actual moralizers, in which case the objections given above apply. They may mean that moral practice possesses certain linguistic and argumentative forms that, though not explicitly realist, are nevertheless such that they could only be vindicated if realism were true. In that case they accept the current point, which is simply that realism is not itself an explicit (pragmatically important) feature of moral practice. It is unclear what else could be intended by the claim that moral practice has 'fact-stating' or 'realist' form that would be such as to generate a distinct presumptive argument.

6.1. Examples of the First Error

The first error of presumptive arguments then, is to assume realism itself (or some of its distinctive claims) to be a pragmatically important form of experience, assumption or linguistic form of moral practice. Examples of this error can be found in the work many moral realists.

Finlay (2007), for instance, employs Timmons' notational distinction between 'facts' and 'FACTS', where the latter captures the sense of 'fact' the realist believes in and the former defines a weaker, minimalist, sense that is potentially compatible with antirealism. In this minimal sense to say it is a to say that it is a fact that recreational torture is wrong is to say no more than that recreational torture is wrong. Finlay (2007 p.824) goes onto claim that claims that '[p]roponents of [realist] positions insist that ordinary practice is committed to moral TRUTH that exists even from a detached moral perspective, and moral FACTS that come to us straight from the WORLD'. In other words, Finlay claims, ordinary moral practice is not just committed to there being moral truth and moral facts, but to a realist understanding of truth and factuality. The problem with this claim is that it is implausible to suppose that ordinary engagement with moral practice involves such philosophically sophisticated commitments. Ordinary moralizers surely assume the existence of moral facts in the minimal sense (since this is no more than to assume that some actions are

right, others wrong), but less obviously assume the existence of moral FACTS. Ask the Clapham omnibus rider whether there are moral FACTS (as opposed to moral facts) and one is just as likely to be met with bewilderment as assent. Further, even if the omnibus rider would assent to moral FACTS (and that would be an empirical matter) it wouldn't follow that this assumption of hers was pragmatically important. Indeed there is strong reason to think that it would not be, namely the ability of those who don't make the assumption to engage productively in moral enquiry. Thus there is no successful presumptive argument based on alleged the assumption of moral FACTS.

In a similar vein, Shafer-Landau (2003 p.24) writes:

> We use indicative mood when issuing moral judgments. We assert that practices, character traits, or states are vicious, morally attractive or deserving…Moral talk is shot through with description, attribution and predication. This makes perfect sense if cognitivism is true.

This passage groups together three putatively distinct notions: description, attribution and predication. The latter is purely syntactic and hence metatheoretically neutral. But if the other two notions are to add to the argument then we must assume that to say that moral talk is descriptive or attributive is to say more than that it involves applying predicates to subjects. What more? To say that moral talk is descriptive could be to say that moral talk involves the expression of mental states that represent the world in moral ways. And to say that moral talk is attributive could be to say that moral talk involves attributing moral properties such as the realist posits to actions, states of affairs and characters (see, for example, Miller 2003 p.38-9). Both of these claims are part of realism. However, when we interpret them this way it becomes controversial whether description and attribution really are some of the pragmatically important features of moral practice. It is undeniable that moral talk involves moral predication and that such a practice is pragmatically important. But to claim that in applying moral predicates agents assume a certain metatheoretical understanding of that practice is much more controversial, and unsupported by simple observations of actual agents applying moral predicates. The empirically uncontroversial phenomenon here is the metatheoretically neutral one of moral predication, with it being a further

issue how that predication is to be understood.[12] Realism and expressivism give two competing explanations, but neither is explicitly assumed by the practice.

Further, even if most everyday moralizers did assume that their moral predication is descriptive and attributive, it wouldn't follow that these assumptions are pragmatically important (and so in need of vindication). For as long as there is a parallel pragmatically equivalent practice available that doesn't involve these assumptions, nothing of distinctive import would be lost by engaging in this practice. An expressivist practice, for example, can preserve standard-governed moral predication (see Blackburn 1984 pp.189-96). Hence the mere fact that moral discourse takes subject-predicate form (and even if this form is understood descriptively and attributively) doesn't generate a presumptive argument for realism.

A final, more subtle yet significant manifestation of the first error can be found in the following passage from McNaughton. Criticizing Blackburn's construction of moral truth for expressivists, McNaughton expounds Blackburn's position as explaining how, from within the practice of forming and regimenting our moral attitudes, it makes sense to suppose that there is a singularly best set of such attitudes and thus from within that practice we can make sense of the notion of a correct moral opinion as an opinion expressing an attitude that belongs within that set. McNaughton (1988 p.188) responds:

> It is difficult to resist the conclusion that, although we talk and think within our moral practice as if there were correct answers to moral questions, Blackburn's theory can make no sense, from the external standpoint, of the notion of a correct moral answer.

McNaughton's point may generalize to a criticism of the antirealist vindication of moral facts and moral truth: it may be, for all the antirealist says, that we can talk within moral practice as if there were moral truths and moral facts (such as the fact that recreational torture is wrong), but the same story cannot make any sense, from the external standpoint, of such facts or truths. Unfortunately for realists, this argument fails. It may be that Blackburn's theory cannot provide an account of a correct moral

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[12] See Prawitz 1977 (quoted in Blackburn 1993 p.183) for a similar point about agents' use of logical argument.

answer from an external standpoint – that is, from a point of view disengaged from moral action, argument and thought – but McNaughton provides no reason to think that moral practice is committed not just to the existence of correct moral answers, but to correctness that can be understood from an external, non-moral, standpoint. Further, it may be that Blackburn's theory cannot provide an account of moral facts or moral truths that are understandable from the detached perspective, but again McNaughton provides no reason to think that moral practice is committed not just to the existence of moral truths and facts, but to moral facts and truths can be understood from a perspective outside of engagement with moral issues. Moral practice is uncontroversially committed to the idea that some moral opinions are correct, others incorrect, and hence to moral facts and moral truths in a minimal sense. Further, if Blackburn's account succeeds (which McNaughton doesn't dispute) we can explain why those engaged in moral practice remain committed to these ideas. But it is a further claim entirely (and an empirically unsubstantiated one) that the pragmatically important assumptions of moral practice include the assumptions that these notions of correctness, fact and truth are understandable from a perspective *outside* of engagement in moral issues. This is to unjustifiably read realist metatheory into the assumptions of moral practice that require vindication.

6.2. Diagnosis of the First Error

If it is indeed an error to read into the pragmatically important features of moral practice some of the distinctive claims of realism, it may help to diagnose possible sources. One such is a potential ambiguity in the terms of the debate. Many terms deployed in metaethics can be interpreted in one way to describe metatheoreteically innocuous features of moral discourse and in another to describe a specific commitments of moral realism. For example, consider the claim: 'There are moral facts'. This can be read in two ways. First, to claim that there are moral facts may be to claim that it is sometimes appropriate to sincerely utter moral sentences such as 'Recreational torture is wrong'. This is the minimal, metatheoretically innocuous sense of fact, mentioned previously, according to which talk of facts fails to raise any nonmoral, metatheoretical, stakes (see Blackburn 1998 p.295). Second, to claim that there are moral facts may be to claim that there are moral states of affairs such as the realist posits. It is uncontroversial that one of the pragmatically important assumptions

of moral practice is that there are moral facts in the former sense. But it is not uncontroversial that one of the pragmatically important assumptions of moral practice is that there are moral facts in the latter sense. Ordinary moralizers are obviously committed to the appropriateness of some moral utterances, but less obviously committed to a realistic construal of those utterances.[13]

Such ambiguity can be pernicious. Consider the following argument.

According to expressivists there are no moral facts. But one of the most pragmatically important assumptions of moral practice is that there are moral facts. For example, it is a fact recreational torture is wrong. Therefore, expressivists cannot vindicate this assumption of moral practice: their view is necessarily revisionary.

The premises of this argument are true, but it is not valid because it trades on ambiguity. The sense in which expressivists deny the existence of moral facts is not the sense in which moral practice assumes there to be such facts.

Though this argument is a parody, several realists come close to offering it. Brink (1989 p.29) argues that 'commonsense moral thinking…supports moral realism in so far as we act as if there are moral facts'. Shafer-Landau (2003 p.25) claims that 'according to non-cognitivism, there are no moral facts or truths'. He equates this with the view that according to non-cognitivism, it is never appropriate to sincerely utter declarative moral sentences (non-cogntivists, Shafer-Landau claims, 'don't believe in virtue'). In response, non-cogntivists can claim that they *do* hold that there are things we should do and that certain characters are virtuous. What they deny is the realist account of such claims. To claim, as these realists appear to, that moral discourse assumes not only that certain actions should be done and that certain characters are virtuous, but also a realistic construal of such claims, is to overestimate the pragmatically important assumptions of ordinary moralizers.

A similar strategy can be applied to other terms that supposedly define moral realism, such as 'belief' or 'mind-independence', for it can be argued that the sense in which ordinary moral practice admits there to be moral beliefs, or admits morality to

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[13] This argument does not entail that ordinary moralizers' employment of terms like 'moral fact' are systematically ambiguous. It is moral realists, not everyday moralizers, who sometimes trade on the ambiguity.

be mind-independent, is not the sense in which expressivists deny that there are such beliefs, or that morality is mind-independent (see Sinclair 2008). In each instance, the key is recognizing that moral discourse employs only a minimal (that is, metaethically neutral) sense of the disputed notion. In the case of belief, for example, we can recognize a useful role for this term in raising and discussing issues of sincerity ('Do you really believe that?'), in expressing uncertain authority for one's commitment ('I believe that abortion is objectionable, but maybe that's just me.') and, more generally in keeping track of commitments that can feature in inferences (see Ridge 2006b). These roles – important to those engaged in the moral practice – define a minimal sense of belief that has a useful function for participants of the practice but which doesn't impinge on metaethical issues. The plausible pragmatically important assumption in this area is only that moral judgments are beliefs in this minimal sense. Likewise, in the case of mind-independence, it can be argued that all ordinary engagement in moral practice commits one to is the thought that the application-conditions for moral predicates are not such that those predicates are correctly applied just when we are the judger possesses a certain attitude. This is a metaethically neutral assumption regarding the application-conditions for moral predicates, not a metaethically loaded one regarding the vindicatory story behind those conditions. (Nor does either of these moves entail that the terms of the metaethical debate are lost: the point is only that ordinary engagement in moral practice takes no stand on the metaethical issues.)

Finally, it is worth considering in this context a popular, if loose, claim often made by realists. This is the claim that, according to antirealism, nothing is right and wrong, at least not *really* (see, for example, Shafer-Landau 2003 pp.14, 27 and 55). With the qualification removed, this claim is false, so what can the 'really' be adding? It could be intimating that, within the context of forming moral opinions, antirealists can never be whole-heartedly committed in the moral stances they adopt. This is also false. For antirealists of the expressivist type, to adopt a moral stance is to adopt a moral attitude, and although there may be some occasions where anemic attitudes are appropriate, there are just as obviously other cases where taking a certain stance, and being guided by that stance in all contexts, is absolutely the thing to do (see Blackburn 1993 p.157). The expression of such stances will result in judgments of rightness and wrongness that are whole-hearted (that is, accepted in all contexts of moral reflection). Alternatively, the 'really' in the disputed claim could be understood

as averting us to realist metaphysics, as claiming that according to antirealism, there are no moral facts *such as the realist believes in*. This is true, but as an argument for moral realism, it is too quick. In order for such an argument to avoid being obviously question-begging the tacit assumption must be that ordinary engagement with moral discourse carries with it commitment moral facts in the realist sense (that is, to moral FACTS). But we have seen good reason to think that this sort of commitment is not a pragmatically important part of moral practice. To assume that it is mistakes the pragmatically important face-value of moral practice.

A second potential source of the error of reading too much metaethics into the face-value of moral practice may be the thought that antirealism is by definition a revisionary theory (see, for example, Brink 1989 p.19 and Dworkin 1996). This thought is easily acquired if introduced to antirealism through the work of A.J. Ayer, who defined his version of antirealism in terms of its denial of truth-aptness to moral sentences – a denial at obvious odds with common practice. Subsequent antirealists, at least of an expressivist variety, disagreed by arguing that attributing an expressive function to moral language does not necessitate denying truth-aptness to the resulting judgments (see, for example, Stevenson 1963 p.215). But in certain quarters the reputation of antirealism was permanently tarnished, and expressivism in particular became a view which by definition seeks to revise at least some of the ordinary assumptions of moral discourse (if not, perhaps, the assumption of truth-aptness). If this characterization of expressivism is correct, then no matter how far the expressivist vindication progresses, there must always be some features of moral practice beyond their reach. These features, whatever they are, will be the distinctive commitment of realism and part of the face-value of moral practice, giving the realist a natural presumptive case against expressivism. The problem with this line of thought is that expressivism is not best characterized as necessarily revisionary. It is best characterized as a view about the distinctive function of moral discourse, a claim that was embryonic in Ayer's work and that leaves open the question of whether or not a practice which serves that function could develop the pragmatically important face-value possessed by actual moral practice. Similarly, realism is not best characterized in terms of the features of moral practice such as truth-aptness. Realists consider themselves to be offering a particular semantic, psychological and metaphysical understanding of the features of moral practice (such as their

understanding of truth-aptness in terms of representation and accuracy) and not just a renumeration of them. Once this way of understanding metaethical theories is accepted, it is harder to suppose that the debate is one on which the face-value of moral discourse takes a determinate position.

7. Second Error: Underestimating Antirealist Resources

According to the argument so far the pragmatically important experiential forms, linguistic features and assumptions of moral practice are metaethically neutral in the sense that they do not involve of any of the distinctive claims of realism. Realism itself is not part of the (pragmatically important) face-value of moral practice.

If that were the whole of the case against presumptive arguments, realists might rightly object that their position has been misrepresented. For what they intended to claim, they might protest, is not that realism itself is part of the pragmatically important face-value of moral practice, but that those who engage in moral practice adopt certain positions and exhibit certain linguistic, discursive or inferential tendencies that could only be vindicated if moral realism is true. On this view, realism itself is not an *apparent* feature or appearance of our moral practice, rather the features of our moral practice are *apparently realist* insofar as it looks as if they can only be vindicated if realism is true.

Some realists are explicit about offering this form of argument. Brink (1989 p.25) writes:

> I do not claim that moral realism is a common belief…my concern is with
> the philosophical implications or presuppositions of moral thought and
> practice. I claim that cognitivism seems to be presupposed by common
> practices of moral judgment, argument and deliberation. (Contrast Shafer-
> Landau 2003 p.18.)

But though such arguments avoid the error of falsifying the pragmtically important face-value of moral practice, they are prone to a second error. One is justified in claiming that only realism can vindicate the pragmtically important features of moral practice just in case it can be shown that no other metaethical theory can vindicate those features. Thus this sort of presumptive argument requires a general claim about

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the options available to the other metaethical theories in vindicating the features of moral practice that stand in need of vindication. It is in making such a claim the realists typically make the second error of presumptive arguments. This is the error of underestimating the resources available to antirealists – and in particular expressivists – by reference to which the vindication can proceed.

When it comes to establishing a presumption against expressivism, the core of this error derives from systematically downplaying certain parts of the expressivist theory. It is common, for example, to understand expressivism as committed to simply two claims: the negative claim that moral judgments do not express moral beliefs and the positive claim that moral judgments express affective attitudes.[14] This characterisation ignores the expressivist picture of the purpose or function of this expression. At least since Stevenson, expressivists have held that we can only properly understand the meaning of moral judgments when we have understood not only the state of mind they express, but also the function of that expression, in particular the distinctive persuasive role of moral judgments. For expressivists, moral judgments are not mere 'sounding off'; they do not simply display one's attitudes as one's choice of football shirt displays one's sporting allegiance. Rather, when we express our moral attitudes we do so with the intention of getting others to share them. Moral judgments are 'instruments used in the complicated interplay and re-adjustment of human interests' (Stevenson 1944 p.13). For expressivists moral discourse is just one part of a wider practice of interpersonal attitudinal regulation. Most generally, the mutual influencing of attitudes takes place via the medium of sanctioning and encouraging behaviors. The behavioral dispositions involved in such regulation are diverse bunch, ranging from simple avoidance to taking social and legal action to curtail other's behavior. Some of these patterns of action are rather inefficient ways of changing attitudes. For example, it may take some time for someone to notice that you are shunning them, even longer for them to work out precisely why and longer still to pursue legal action against them. What is useful, therefore, is a way of expressing one's preparedness to engage in this sort of encouraging and sanctioning behavior without actually doing so. This is what moral discourse does, according to

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[14] See, for example, Brink 1989 p.19, Shafer-Landau 2003 p.18 and Sinnott-Armstrong 2006 p.18. The label 'non-cognitivism' exacerbates this tendency, which may explain why few expressivists accept it. Blackburn (1998 p.77) prefers to call his view 'practical functionalism'.

expressivists. By judging that recreational torture is wrong, for example, I express a willingness to impose these sorts of sanctions on those who fail to share my disapproval of torture. This threat of sanctions can itself have a sanctioning effect (likewise for indications of encouragement). Moral discussion, therefore, acts as a demilitarized zone where agents can discuss adjustments in attitude without resorting to the military options of physical or legal sanction. For agents with an incentive to get along, moral discussion is a pragmatically useful option.

This placing of moral judgments as instruments in the practice of co-ordination of attitude provides many of the materials with which expressivists vindicate the pragmatically important features of moral practice. Consequently, underplaying the practical role of moral judgments can lead some realists to erroneously conclude that only they can provide the requisite vindications. In what follows I give three examples of how emphasizing the practical role can aid the expressivist vindications.

7.1. Examples of the Second Error

Three pragmatically important assumptions of moral practice are that moral disagreements are possible, that moral discussion is sometimes a fruitful way of resolving and that reasons can be offered in favor of and against moral claims. These are assumptions of moral practice not in the sense that agents are disposed to assent such claims, or disposed to assent after tutoring (though they may be) but in the sense that the behavior of agents that engage in moral practice only make sense if these assumptions are true. For a presumptive argument based on these assumptions to succeed realists need to support the claim that only they can vindicate them. This in turn relies on a claim regarding the resources available to antirealists in achieving the same task. So how might the respective vindications proceed?

Moral realists vindicate the assumptions as follows: moral disagreement occurs when one party offers a description of the state of a certain part of the world; another party offers a different description; both descriptions cannot be accurate; so neither can accept the other's commitment. In so far as both have an interest in providing correct descriptions of the world, both have a motive for changing the opinion of the other. Further, moral discussion is sometimes a fruitful way of resolving such disputes because such discussion can help us alert others to features of

the situation that they may have missed, thus providing them with an opportunity to reassess their description of how things are, morally speaking. Finally, the realist picture can explain the practice of providing reasons in favor of moral claims: these are reasons for thinking moral reality to be a certain way. In so far as moral disputants are concerned to provide an accurate description of this reality, such considerations will be salient to their project.

For expressivists moral disagreement can seem more ephemeral: what can moralizers be disagreeing about, if it isn't the (moral) state of the world? The answer, of course, is that moral disagreement is practical disagreement that occurs when agents 'have opposed attitudes to the same object – one approving of it, for instance, and the other disapproving of it – and when at least one of them has a motive for altering or calling into question the attitude of the other' (Stevenson 1944 p.3).[15] So whereas disagreement in descriptive matters is born from a concern to change each other's beliefs, disagreement in morals is borne from a concern to change each other's attitudes. So long as there is a motive to insist on change there is a disagreement.[16]

What of the role of moral discussion and the practice of giving reasons? Given the above account of moral disagreement as resting on a motive for altering attitudes, reasons in support of a moral claim will be reasons in support of taking the particular attitude towards the object of evaluation that the moral claim recommends (or insists on). Likewise, reasons against a particular moral claim will be reasons against taking the particular attitude towards the object of evaluation that the claim recommends (or insists on). A reason in support of or against an attitude typically involves citing a putative feature of the object to which that attitude is a response. Reasons in support of (or against) attitudes will, therefore, typically consist of descriptive claims about the nature of the object being evaluated. The aim in making such claims is to change other's attitudes to the object of evaluation by changing their beliefs on which those attitudes are based. In so far as our attitudes can be altered by changes in our beliefs

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[15] In Blackburn's (1998 p.69) terms, moral disagreements are disagreements 'in our house'.

[16] Opponents might argue that an adequate account of moral disagreement needs also to accommodate the sense in which intuitively opposed moral sentences, such as 'Abortion is wrong' and 'It is not the case that abortion is wrong' are logically inconsistent, and that the Stevensonian account offered here fails to do this. This is to urge an instance of the Frege-Geach problem, as applied to negation (see, for example, Schroeder 2008). Fortunately, this problem is not insurmountable, and can be solved in part by employing the basic Stevensonian tools mentioned here: see Sinclair 2011.

about the nature of the object being evaluated, discussions of that nature have a role in moral discussion.[17]

By emphasizing this role the expressivist can therefore vindicate our everyday assumptions concerning moral argument and reason-giving and thus undermine presumptive arguments that employ such assumptions. These presumptive arguments fail because it is false that only realists can vindicate the assumptions in question. Although none of these above expressivist vindications are original, they are instructive in so far as they show what the expressivist can achieve once she emphasizes the practical co-ordinating role of moral discourse.

None of the features of moral practice listed in §1(a) are without an attempted expressivist vindication and many of these rely on emphasizing the practical coordinating role of moral practice. For example, within the context of forming attitudes for the purposes of mutual co-ordination, it makes sense to have an interest in the implications of one's attitudes, in clashes of attitude, in how one's set of attitudes might be improved and in the implications of the attitudes one has. These concerns provide the material for a vindicatory story of the subject-predicate form of moral sentences and their embedding in standard inference patterns (see Blackburn 1984 pp.189-96, 1988b, 1998 pp.68-77, 2002 and Gibbard 2003). Other examples of expressivist vindications relying on a practical coordinating function are the vindication of mind-independence (see Sinclair 2008), fallibility and the possibility of moral knowledge (see Blackburn 1980 and 1981). It is impossible to assess all these attempted vindications here, but fortunately for the expressivist who opposes presumptive arguments it is also not necessary. It is the realist who must support their claim that these expressivist vindications *cannot* succeed. The present point is just that given the resources open to expressivists once they emphasize the practical coordinating role of moral practice, this claim is best premature.

The first mistake of presumptive arguments – reading the claims of realism into pragmatically important features of moral practice – is also relevant here. Many realists publicly doubt the breadth of resources available to expressivism when vindicating the face-value of moral discourse. Many of these suppose further that they can present presumptive arguments of the sort under consideration without discussing in detail the proposed expressivist vindications (see, for example, Brink 1989 pp.14-

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[17]See Stevenson 1950, 1962 and Blackburn 1988a. There is no guarantee that a given agent's attitudes will be responsive to the features cited, but this reflects the reality of moral discussion.

36 and Shafer-Landau 2003 p.13-38). This would be a reasonable strategy if the features in question themselves embodied some of the claims of realism, for then we could know in advance that no expressivist vindication of these features could be complete (only realism can vindicate, in a non-error-theoretic way, an explicit assumption of realism). But, as I have argued above, there is no reason to think that the pragmatically important face-value of moral practice is explicitly realist in this way. It is therefore unreasonable to assume the failure of expressivist vindications in advance of detailed consideration of expressivists' efforts. This point, together with a proper appreciation for the resources available to expressivists, provides general reason to be skeptical of the second stage of presumptive arguments.

In light of this, realists face what may be called Kirchin's dilemma, since it generalizes a point Kirchin (2003 p.257) makes about phenomenological arguments. Either proponents of presumptive arguments describe the pragmatically important face-value of moral practice in explicitly realist terms, in which case they misrepresent that face-value or its pragmatic importance. Or they describe it in metaethically neutral terms, in which case they cannot justify their sweeping assumption that all possible expressivist vindications of this face-value fail, especially in the light of a proper understanding of available antirealist strategies. It is an worthshile task to consider how may extant presumptive arguments avoid both horns of this dilemma.

8. Weak Presumptive Arguments

Some realists might accept the foregoing and concede that antirealists, or at least expressivists, can vindicate all of the pragmatically important features of moral practice. Yet these realists may hold that it remains the case that these vindications are unnatural, uneasy or unnecessarily complex. This is to offer a weak presumptive argument for moral realism. Both Brink and Shafer-Landau seem to offer such arguments. But what is it that realists intend to assert when they assert that the antirealist vindication of the face-value of moral practice is *unnatural*? In this section I consider three possible interpretations of this claim, none of which generates the desired presumption.

First, the claim may be that although antirealists, or at least expressivists, can vindicate the linguistic and discursive forms of moral practice, they cannot vindicate the assumptions about those forms. For example, realists might hold that moral practice allows application of the truth predicate (linguistic form) and assumes that that predication is the attribution of a robust property of correspondence between the representational content of the judgement and the state of the world (assumption about the form). Consistent with this, antirealists may give an account of the application of the truth predicate in moral contexts, but this account would be unnatural in so far as it fails to vindicate the common assumption of that this predication is genuinely attributive of the realist property of truth. On this view, to say that the antirealist vindication is unnatural is to say that it is incomplete: it vindicates the forms but not the assumptions of moral practice. This sort of weak presumptive argument is really a strong presumptive argument in disguise, since it claims that there are some assumptions of moral practice (assumptions about its linguistic forms) that cannot be vindicated by antirealists because they are explicitly realist. This leaves such arguments vulnerable to the first mistake I have outlined above: that of taking realism itself to be a pragmatically important feature of moral practice. In this case, there is no reason to think that the assumption regarding the nature of the truth-predicate is a pragmatically important part of the practice.

Second, the claim may be that antirealist vindication of the features of moral practice is unnatural in so far as it is counter to the vindicatory story that most people are inclined to believe, or the story that most people are tempted to adopt when they engage in metaethical reflection. On this view, although the features of moral practice are not in any way explicitly metatheoretical, it is a fact that when people come to consider metaethical questions they most readily or naturally accept the realist answer to those questions. For example, one metaethical question is how we are to understand the notion of truth as employed by moral practice. Realists offering the sort of argument being considered here would claim that the realist understanding of truth – roughly, as accuracy of representation – is the view of truth that we most naturally come to when considering this question. Another common example of this argument concerns logical relations such as consistency and validity. Realists may hold that although expressivists can provide an account of these relations as they hold between moral judgments, it is not the most natural, philosophical scheme of understanding

such relations (see Shafer-Landau 2003 p.18). Thus even if expressivism is not revisionary of our actual moral practice, it is revisionary of our most readily adopted theories of phenomena such as truth-talk and logical argument.

This is a much more interesting interpretation of weak presumptive arguments, but it also exposes the weakness in the realist position. Those who adopt this line accept that expressivists can vindicate all of the features of moral practice that require vindication. The expressivist view of consistency and validity, for example, is not viewed as inferior because it is less respectful of the important parts of actual moral argument – it is accepted that expressivists can vindicate these notions as they are employed by everyday moralizers.[18] What is denied is that this vindication employs an understanding of these notions that is consonant with our most readily accepted view of them. But it is hard to see how this generates a reason to consider the expressivist vindication inferior. The fact (if it is a fact) that the realist theory of consistency and validity is more initially appealing provides no reason whatsoever to consider it correct, since its psychological attraction to us may be the result of all sorts of factors unconnected to its truth. For example, it may be due to the fact is the realist theory is the first theory we were acquainted with, or which is more readily understood.[19]

Another way of making this point as follows. Suppose, as proponents of weak presumptive arguments do, that the pragmatically important features of moral practice involve in themselves no explicit metaethical claims. In the case of the logical relations that exist between moral judgments the claim would be that all moral practice assumes is that certain combinations of commitment are inconsistent and hence that certain inferences are valid. Since it is the task of metaethics to give an account (and, it is arguable, a vindicating account) of such practices, it follows that it is the task of metaethics to give an account of the nature of consistency and validity. Therefore, the nature of these relations is an unresolved issue in metaethical dispute. Furthermore a presumption in favor of one particular theory cannot be grounded in a claim that reflects an unresolved issue in the debate between that theory and its rivals (see Loeb 2007 p.476). And since the issue of the nature of logical relations is an unresolved issue in metaethical dispute, one cannot take a particular position on that

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[18] For an expressivist view of consistency and validity, see Blackburn 1998 p.72 and Gibbard 2003 chapter 4. For a further alternative to the realist model of consistency and validity, see Field 1977.
[19] For a structurally similar point, see Rosen and Dorr 2002 p.158.

issue to generate a presumption in favor of realism. Therefore, by taking the presumption in favor of realism to depend on the adoption of certain theories of logical relations (for example) realists display an impoverished view of the sorts of issue to be determined in constructing a complete metaethical theory.[20] We cannot, in short, support realism by tacitly assuming a realist view of consistency or validity (or belief, truth or knowledge or mind-independence or…) where that view is not reflected in the pragmatically important face-value of moral practice.

One final way to interpret the claim of unnaturalness employed in weak presumptive arguments is as the claim that the antirealist vindicatory story of moral practice is not the same vindicatory story that it is plausible to tell when we consider other practices that exhibit structurally similar features to moral practice. The practice of reflecting, deliberating and arguing about tables, for example, exhibits analogues of all the features of moral discourse listed in §1(a) and shares with moral practice a undeniable pragmatic importance in our lives. In the case of this 'table practice' a realist vindicatory story is plausible. The realist can then argue that her theory has an advantage of providing a unified account of structurally similar practices. As Finlay (2007 p.825) puts it:

> Whereas realism can simply take logical relations and talk of truth, facts, properties, and descriptions in the moral domain to be continuous with those in other domains, according to our best semantic and metaphysical theories, antirealists must either distinguish distinct moral equivalents for these, or defend radical revisions of our general theories.

But this dilemma for the antirealist is a false one, because it mischaracterizes the antirealist position. The implication of Finlay's argument is that antirealists must take talk of truth, facts, logical relations and so on, to be discontinuous between the cases of table and moral practice (or else adopt a radically revisionary global antirealism). However, once we expunge the first error of reading any metatheory into the features of moral – or other – practice, the charge of discontinuity fails to stick. Antirealists about morality do not hold that in moral practice we assume an antirealist

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[20] For an example of this error, see Finlay 2007 p.824.

understanding of 'fact' whereas in table practice we assume a realist one. Rather, according to antirealism – and any metatheory properly responsive to the pragmatically important forms of actual practice – the practices in question should not be taken to involve any explicitly metatheoretical position, realist or antirealist. Talk of 'facts' in table practice is continuous with the talk of 'facts' in moral practice, since each employs the minimal and metatheoretically neutral sense of 'fact' discussed in §6.1. Therefore, at the level of the ordinary engagement in the practice, there is no discontinuity. At the level of metatheoretical reflection antirealists do accept a discontinuity between the different vindicatory stories for the features of the respective practices. This, antirealists will admit, is a genuine discontinuity, but it is an innocuous one, because there is no reason to suppose that, at the metatheoretical level, the correct vindicatory account of our many and varied pragmatically important discursive practices is a uniform one. Indeed, given the obvious differences between the ways in which those practices are pragmatically important to us, a strong case can be made for thinking that correct vindicatory account of all of those practices will not be unified. Therefore the antirealist vindication of the features of moral discourse cannot be labeled unnatural on the basis of it being discontinuous with the vindicatory story given for table discourse.

It remains a possibility that realists may have something else in mind when they claim that the vindicatory story provided by antirealists – and in particular expressivists – is unnatural. If so, it is their responsibility to articulate it. Until they do so, the conclusion is that, just like the strong arguments, no extant weak presumptive argument successfully establishes a defeasible case for realism.

9. Conclusion

When it comes to moral practice, metaethics should leave everything as it is. At least, any theory that forces us to revise some of the pragmatically important elements of moral practice is by that token implausible. But when it comes to assessing whether or not a particular theory asks us to revise an important part of moral practice, and hence whether there is a presumption against it, we must be careful to do two things. First, we must delineate the proper content of the pragmatically important features of moral practice. If the arguments of §6 are right, many realists fail to do this since they

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include in those features explicitly realist commitments. Second, we must appreciate the full extent of the resources available to the alternative – particularly expressivist – views in vindicating these features, once they have been metaethically cleansed. If the suggestions in §7 are correct, many realists fail to do this by systematically underdescribing the expressivist theory.

The above arguments do not warrant the conclusion that there is no possible presumptive argument for moral realism. The primary concern of this paper has been to show that presumptive arguments based on the features listed in §1(a) fail. This is significant, because most extant presumptive arguments focus on a subset of these features. Nevertheless, it remains a possibility that the realist could bring to our attention further features of moral practice that are both pragmatically important and impossible to vindicate from an antirealist perspective. The above arguments provide no objection to realists who argue against antirealism in this way. Nevertheless the above criticisms of extant presumptive arguments provides some reason to be pessimistic about all presumptive arguments. First because such arguments must avoid both horns of Kirchin's dilemma, and the history of failure of presumptive arguments failure to do so provides some support for the conclusion that all such arguments will be impaled in this way. Second and more importantly, because realists face an application of the law of diminishing returns should they offer presumptive arguments based on features other than the ones considered here. This is because the goal of any metatheory is to vindicate the pragmatically important features of moral practice and it is plausible to suppose that the features listed in §1(a) to a large extent exhaust this pragmatic importance. The further presumptive arguments depart from features on this list, therefore, the harder it is to support the claim that the relevant feature is pragmatically important, and the more plausible the antirealist response that the feature in question does not, after all, require vindication. To see how this dialectic might function, consider the assumption of fallibility. Although, as has been argued, it is plausible that this is a pragmatically important part of moral practice, it is far less plausible whether the notion of *fundamental* fallibility – that is, the possibility of an erroneous opinion that may persist once all oppurtunities for improving one's set of attitudes have been taken – is pragmatically important (see Egan 2007). In so far as this is doubtful, the expressivist has two chances to undermine the presumptive argument based on this feature: they may attempt a vindication, or they may deny the need for vindication. In general, the farther a presumptive argument departs from the

pragmatically important features listed in §1(a), the more persuasive this second response becomes. Thus, although the arguments presented here do not directly consider all possible presumptive arguments, they provide some (defeasible) reason to be skeptical of all such arguments. They establish a presumption against presumptive arguments.

Finally, it is important to consider the effect of the rejection of presumptive arguments on the standard concerns of metaethics. As was argued in §1, at best presumptive arguments provide a defeasible case for realism: if they succeed they show that only realism can satisfy one desideratum of metaethical theorizing. This comparative advantage may or may not prove decisive in the light of further desiderata. But if the arguments here are correct, consideration of the face-value of moral practice underdetermines the correct metaethical theory; it provides no defeasible reason in favor of any particular metaethical theory, realist or otherwise. Therefore, considering how metaethical theories meet any further desiderata becomes crucially important.

One candidate for an additional desideratum is consistency with our wider philosophical theories of metaphysics, epistemology, psychology and semantics. Since metaethical theories make claims about the metaphysical, epistemology, psychology and semantics of moral value, it seems reasonable to assess them by their consistency with our best philosophical theories of these matters (see Timmons 1999 and McNaughton 1988 p.64; for skepticism see McDowell 1987). The acceptance of this desideratum in addition to that of face-savingness has had a large influence on triangulating the concerns and methods of recent metaethics. A common dialectic is as follows. First, realists seek to show how they can, but antirealists cannot, properly vindicate all of the features of moral practice (that is, they seek to generate the presumption). Second, realists seek to defend their view against objections to its metaphysical, epistemological, psychological and semantic claims (that is, they seek to show that the presumption is not outweighed). McNaughton (1988 pp.40-1) sums up this project:

> …the [presumptive] starting point of the argument influences its shape…The realist contention is that he only has to rebut the arguments designed to persuade us that moral realism is philosophically untenable in

order to make out his case. (See also Brink 1989 p.25 and Shafer-Landau 2003 p.37.)

This dialectic is particularly prevalent in book-length defenses of moral realism, such as those offered by McNaughton, Brink and Shafer-Landau, but also influences other contributions, such as those of Sinnott-Armstrong and Finlay. It generates particular, though different, concerns for realists and antirealists. For realists, the principal concern in light of this dialectic is to defend the plausibility of their metaphysical, epistemological, psychological and semantic claims, hoping that in doing so they have cleared the way for the presumption in favor of their view to turn decisive. For antirealists the principal concern has been either to accept the presumption and show that the considerations against moral realism can outweigh the presumption in favor (see Mackie 1977 pp.36-42) or to seek to undermine the presumption by providing the required vindications (see Blackburn 1993 and 1998). But if the above arguments are correct, focusing on these areas will not suffice to determine any important metaethical issues. On the realist side, it is will no longer be enough to defend the plausibility of their wider philosophical claims whilst leaving the presumptive case as the only positive argument: they must instead employ these claims in positive arguments for their position. For antirealists, guarding against the re-emergence of a presumptive case by laying out the detail of their vindicatory story will remain vital, but it will not be enough to provide a comprehensive defense of antirealism. In addition, antirealists must argue positively in favor of their metaphysical, epistemological, psychological and semantic claims. Little existing work in metaethics addresses these concerns. If the above considerations are on the right lines, therefore, they necessitate a significant redrawing of the proper boundaries of argumentative concern for realists and antirealists alike.

Acknowledgements

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